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# A viewpoint from the Foothills: Making Sepik Valley images as containers

*Vu du Piémont : les images du Sepik comme réceptacles*

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# A viewpoint from the Foothills: making Sepik valley images as containers

by

Ludovic COUPAYE*

ABSTRACT

*This paper examines a range of Sepik valley human figures, building on the non-verbal dimensions of images identified by A. Forge, D. Tuzin and G. Bateson, and developed by researchers such as A. Gell, C. Kaufmann and C. Severi. I suggest that one of the non-verbal devices that these figures rely on, betrays an underlying idea of images-as-potential-receptacle, itself based on a reference to the human body as container. Sepik artists can thus use motifs (as visual, material and spatial arrangements) which trigger inferential (indexical, iconic, and/or mnemonic) processes that evoke container-like capacities by reference to the human figure. Based on this hypothesis, I explore the ways in which the surfaces of artefacts are treated in order to both reveal and conceal an interior, as a possible container of ancestral capacities.*

Keywords: Art, Sepik, semiotics, motifs, surface, body, containers

RÉSUMÉ

*Cet article examine un éventail de figures humaines de la vallée du Sepik, en s'appuyant sur la dimension non-verbale des images, identifiée par Forge, Tuzin et Bateson et développée par les travaux de chercheurs tels que Gell, Kaufmann et Severi. J'y suggère que l'un des procédés non verbaux à partir desquels ces figures sont conçues traduit une conception de l'image comme réceptacle, elle-même fondée sur une référence du corps humain comme contenant. Les artistes du Sepik peuvent alors utiliser des motifs (agencements visuels, matériels et spatiaux) dans le but de provoquer des processus inférentiels (indiciels, iconiques et/ou mnémoniques) attribuant aux images des capacités de « conteneurs » en faisant référence à la figure humaine. Sur la base de cette hypothèse, j'examine la façon dont les surfaces des artefacts sont traitées de manière à suggérer un intérieur, comme réceptacle possible de la présence ancestrale et de ses capacités génératrices.*

Mots-clés : art, Sepik, sémiotique, motifs, surfaces, corps, contenants

Arguably, the Sepik area occupies a special position in the methodological and theoretical transformations of anthropological analysis of "art". The past four decades have seen the "anthropology of art" moving away from its original quest for meaning to instead venture into the pragmatic dimensions of objects and images (e.g. Gell, 1998, among many others). Indeed, one could suggest that these changes were prompted by the encounter between the visual productions of Sepik valley societies and the work of a small number of foundational researchers.

This paper is an experiment in prolonging some of these foundations with more recent theoretical shifts in anthropology of art. I chose thus to examine a selection of Sepik valley material[1], using suggestions stemming from my own work with the Abulës-speakers (Abelam) of Nyamikum (Coupaye, 2013 et 2017). I start with A. Forge's seminal analyses of Maprik art, D. Tuzin's work on the relationship between forms, meaning and the social

1. I shall thus not examine materials from other Sepik foothills groups, such as the Boiken or the Arapesh. Similarly, I make mention of Maprik forms only as a comparative device.

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agency of figuration in the art of the Ilahita Arapesh, and G. Bateson's discussion of the "corrective nature of art" (1972). I suggest that these three perspectives allow for a readjustment of more recent discussions on the agentive potential of art by A. Gell (1992, 1998) and the role of memory by both C. Kaufmann (1993) and C. Severi (2007). I illustrate this experiment with an examination of the relations between body and inside, envelopes and containers, in reference to the relationship between figuration and ontological regimes by P. Descola (2010), through their treatment of the dynamics of surfaces/volumes in Sepik arts.

## Forge, Tuzin and Bateson

I detect three main related trends running through Forge's and Tuzin's contributions. The first trend considered visual arts as an essential part of the social and political lives of Maprik communities, making them a crucial ethnographic point of entry into indigenous systems of thoughts and representations.[2] The second trend was a break from the analytical domination of linguistics on the relations between arts and language. This distance, taken from Saussurian semiological analyses, came from two ethnographic observations. On the one hand, there was no direct equation between motifs and units of signification, or between their organisation and the organisation of a sentence. On the other hand, the role of visual arts as restricted to the representation of something existing in the verbal domain, such as oral history or myths, proved difficult if not impossible to demonstrate. Thus, linguistic models – implicitly grounded in the role of writing in literary traditions – were insufficient for unveiling the rules governing the creation and the interpretation of images.

The third trend was the recognition of the active social role of visual productions as devices that affect their audiences at a deeper level than the mere evocation of oral knowledge (see also Roscoe [1995] on Boiken paintings). Images were no longer passive reflections of forms of knowledge, but were active agents of socialisation through their effects on the imagination and mental processes of their audience.

No doubt, the ethnographic specificities of both Abulës-speakers and Ilahita Arapesh – including their historical relations – were at the very source of such changes. Forge's study was grounded on a detailed iconographic analysis of the different motifs of the ceremonial house facade that showed their highly metaphorical and polysemic nature. As for Tuzin, his analysis of Ilahita's rituals (Tuzin, 1976 and 1980) also led him to unveil the role of visual arts in the expression of the unconscious aspects of cultural values.

Whether due to a gap in ethnography or being actually crucial for the ways Maprik images really worked, in both case-studies the centrality of the *unsaid* emerged as a feature to be explored. Bateson, though drawing from Balinese paintings rather than his own Sepik experience (1936), made the same point by claiming that an important part of visual forms of expression were beyond the scope of explicitness; the understanding of images operated, like skills, necessarily at an unconscious level.

The lack of explicitness invited the three scholars to orient their investigation towards the relationships between designs and emic modalities of perception – though in different ways and at different periods. Forge linked the source and the subject of visual forms to Abulës sociality. According to him, the principles governing the modes of figuration were fundamentally about gender and sexual complementarity and the role of male artists was to capture and make manifest these fundamental principles required for social reproduction, as they were for their biological one (Forge, 1966; 1967; 1970; 1973). Art was thus not "a representation *of* something in the natural or spirit world, but rather was *about* the relationship between things" (Forge, 1973: 189, original emphasis). His conclusion hinted at the reflexive nature of Abulës art as a form of vernacular commentary on sociality – also prefiguring the move towards relationality that would become one of the major trends in Melanesian anthropology (e.g. Strathern, 1995).

Bateson, resorting to psychology and cognition, focussed on how motifs create patterns, rhythms and redundancies to point out relations between conscious statements – explicit and related to reason – and unconscious statements – implicit, unsaid, and felt. For him, images offer the human mind a more systemic and ecological synthesis of the world, compensating for the purposive rationality of everyday actions. This "corrective nature of art" presents to the mind with an aesthetic experience, encompassing and recreating relations between domains that are usually experienced as different, knitting together conceptions of death, sexuality, sociality and politics in a tight network.

Tuzin, writing later (1995, 2002), also focussed on the psychological and cognitive grounding of the art experience by analysing the ways images convey the unthinkable in an ineffable way. For male members of Ilahita society, the unthinkable was the primacy of female procreativity compensated by the fantasy of male parthenogenesis (Tuzin, 1995). To deal with these complex statements, Ilahita artists would resort to elaborate techniques of illusion which were particularly effective in the

2. See also R. Firth's foundational work (1936).

highly emotionally charged context of initiations (Tuzin, 2002). These techniques aimed at creating an eerie feeling, at the limit of consciousness, and were strong enough to have an effect on the mind and the body of their audience, evoking the presence of potent ancestral entities.

There is something like a general theory of art adumbrated by these authors in the ways in which they empirically related the detailed study of motifs, as well as their organisation and the setting in which they appear, to general vernacular representations about the world and its inhabitants. All are, to some degrees, about how images relate to general principles that govern the social and natural life and reproduction of both human and non-human beings. At the emic level, they demonstrated that indigenous regimes of representations and vernacular conceptions of images testified to high level of sophistications. At the etic level, their analyses were based on an investigation of vernacular theories of what "signs" were and how they worked.

## Semiotic[3] ideologies and ontological regimes

The idea of images which do not passively convey messages but which, instead, actively participate in indigenous social lives and imaginations, was a major analytical move. Gell's posthumous provocative opus on the agency of art (1998) presented then in many ways one of the latest attempts to propose a general anthropological theory of art[4], presenting images as non-human social agents. Contrasting with his earlier structuralist study of Umeda ritual visual imagery (Gell, 1975), his approach participated in the same move away from semiological interpretations in order to demonstrate the non-verbal and agentive nature of images. There are commonalities between Gell, Bateson and Forge in their close analysis of the visual role of individual motifs in the ways in which images create relations with one another by forming networks. But where Forge investigated the polysemic and indirect connotations of motifs, Gell, like Bateson, focussed on the ways in which forms provoke cognitive responses in the mind of the audience.

This cognitive-oriented approach has allowed for the study of images not as discrete entities, but also as particular and deliberate configurations of forms associated with shifting sets of referents. Associations between motifs and referents stemmed not solely from each individual design but also from the actual organisation of the whole set of motifs creating composite forms and patterns. From a purely visual perspective, the effect of images, thus, comes from three different levels: firstly, from interpretative processes of identifying the individual parts and/or the whole; secondly from the ways in which a particular configuration of motifs creates visual effects; and thirdly, from the cognitive process at play in both previous levels. These can create emotions, such as uneasiness, fear or awe, produced at the moment of their recognition not only of the whole, but also of other levels of associations.

Gell's demonstration was based on two important concepts, "index" and "abduction", taking a methodological shift from Saussurian linguistics towards the theory of signs developed by C. S. Peirce (1955 [1893-1902]). These concepts allowed him to show that, from the point of view of the audience, processes of recognition are grounded in the type of inferential processes triggered by iconic relations, based on "likeness", and indexical relations, based on "indication" or manifestation of a particular event.

"Likeness", or iconicity, is however not limited to shapes but also helps extend to other visual attributes, such as material properties or hues of colours.[5] This vastly extends the possibilities of establishing webs of relations with almost anything that is part of the mental universe of the society considered, feeding the "analogic extension" (Wagner, 1986) of metaphors and metonymies (or, as Lemonnier puts it, creating "perissologies", 2012). Indexicality refers to a phenomenon whose origin is beyond the realm of immediate experience, but is nevertheless made present through its effects or the traces it leaves. Images can thus be thought of as particular materialisations of an external agency. The most obvious examples range from sounds, such as drum beats reflecting the steps of the ancestors (Schindlbeck, 2016: 93) or flutes, resonators or bullroarers, to the imparting of movements to artefacts, such as dancing masks or the shaking of the *yena* heads during Kwoma ceremonies (Kaufmann, 2016: 110-111).

More recently, Descola pushed further the semiotic model by exploring the ways in which modes of figurations mobilise semiotic relations to give forms to ontological regimes (Descola, 2010: 11-18). Indexicality and iconicity display networks of ontological continuities or discontinuities between

3. By *semiotics* I refer to the ways in which signs (be they visual or otherwise) creates inferences about what is experienced. I am thus referring to the ways in which C. S. Peirce dealt with the pragmatic nature of signs as opposed to *semiology*, as introduced by F. de Saussure, which study the science of signs from the angle of language (see Nöth, 1995: 11-38).

4. While I have restricted myself to research conducted in the East Sepik Province, many crucial contributions also come from other researchers working in various Pacific contexts, who I can only mention here due to the limited space. Among many others these include N. Munn, H. Morphy, M. O'Hanlon, M. Jeudy-Ballini, S. Küchler, S. Campbell and closer to us, G. Were and S. Revolon.

5. See also Munn (1986), and the discussion in Coupaye (2013: 274-284; 2017).

Photo 1. – Men's house post, Population Sawos, Nangusap village (Wood, 296 x 47 cm, musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac). The swirls, visible on the side of the post, often represented on Iatmul and Sawos's carvings, evokes both the scales and the eddies on the surface of water, themselves indexes of the presence of a crocodile. The image is thus more than a "representation" of an ancestor, and makes its manifestation present, through a tight web of references, merging together, ancestor, its avatar, the crocodile, whose presence manifests itself through eddies, and sometimes, like here, wild pigs.

humans and non-humans (animals, plants, landmarks, etc.), based on qualities indigenous societies attribute to them. These are both in terms of "physicalities" such as behaviours, modes of locomotion or of reproduction (Pitrou, Coupaye and Provost, 2015), and "interiorities" such as intentions, affects, agency (Descola, 2010: 11-18).

However, indexicality and iconicity might not always be clearly distinct from one another (Jakobson, 1971: 700), depending on the type of vernacular semiotic ideology that is "people's background assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world" (Keane, 2005: 1991). This means that the ontological distinction between "likeness" and "effect" might be neither stable nor asserted. As both Tuzin and Forge have demonstrated, Sepik art is particularly proficient in purposefully scrambling any easy form of recognition, such troubling effect being in itself not only an intention, but in fact the very index of ancestral presence.

Hence the swirls on the surface of Iatmul carvings seem to refer to eddies at the surface of the Sepik valley, an index of the presence of a crocodile, itself the avatar of an ancestor (photo 1; see also Newton, 1971: 10, fig. 1). In turn and by the resort of an iconic relation, waves can be carved onto the surface of an artefact, thus tightening its association with the ancestor.

Naming itself could reinforce the association: the attribution of a specific name, part of a clan repertoire, a widespread practice in the area (see Harrison, 1990; Wassmann, 1991; Moutu, 2013) also played on the double semiotic relation. It allowed artefacts to be activated (such as drums and canoes, see Harrison, 1993: 99), by creating a form of likeness with the prototype, as well as making the prototype present and active.

Inferential process – abduction for iconicity and induction for indexes – are thus at the source of the effects that the display of artefacts has on the audience's mind. These processes are particularly powerful when applied to one of the recurring motifs of Sepik art, as identified by many authors (Newton, 1971: 10; Kaufmann, 1993: 217-235), that is the human figure.

**Human figures: bodies and containers.**

Examples of figuration of whole or parts of human figures abound in the Sepik valley. They range from the body forming the main part of the figure (male figure from Angriman, Iatmul, Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 184, cat. 67), to complex association with other forms, such as birds, crocodile or lizards (Ramu slitgong, Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 200-2001, cat. 84). The head or the face itself can appear painted or engraved on the surfaces of objects (Wogumas shield, Newton, 1971: 107) or in the round (Kwoma pot or Biwat Biwat flute ornament, Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 270-271, cat. 153-154, 295: cat. 180; McDowell, 2016; see also Kaufmann, 1993: 228, see photo 2).

Be it in ornaments, masks or architecture, the recruitment of human features seems ubiquitous in Sepik art, even in its most geometric or distorted form (Bahinemo's hook, see photo 3; Newton, 1971: 26-27, fig. 23-33).

From a semiotic perspective, the body is likely the shape (sign) with which human beings are most familiar, be it in themselves or in others, and is the primary locus of personhood and agency. Thus, a person's recognition of anthropomorphic representations is grounded in her/his own experience (or memory) of both her/his own body and that of others. Through the interplay of iconic and indexical relations, this experience is not only based on the recognition of formal attributes such as limbs, eyes and mouths, but also allows the attribution of forms of "interiority" (Descola, 2010). In this perspective, anthropomorphic traits could thus be mobilised to imbue artefacts,

or what they re-present, with human-like properties and qualities.

Parallel to interiority, bodies are also seen as possessing another fundamental property, as containers of substances (blood, sperm or vital force, see Warnier, 2006), intentions and capacities in particular reproduction (see also Silverman, 1996). From this perspective, one can ground the privileged role Sepik artefacts play in rituals on the faculty of human bodies to be containers of capacities that not only include "interiority" but also the possibility to be recipients of fluid powers. Indeed, in Melanesia, bodies are often primarily seen as an envelope, mostly the skin (*sëpë* in Abulës), appearance and limbs, as well as a range of orifices through which substances and energies can circulate (in both directions), as well as words, images, and in the particular case of female bodies, actual living beings.

The adjunction of anthropomorphic traits on an artefact, thus, could have played a double role. Firstly, for the audience, the recognition of human-like physical features in an artefact – however decomposed or distorted – scrambled its automatic recognition as a mere "object" and opens up the possibility of the presence of a subjectivity in the artefact. Secondly, the representation of a generic "body" could also indicate a receptacle of agency and capacities. These, I suggest, played a crucial role in the representation of one of the main subjects of Sepik art: the relation with spirits and ancestors, and their capacity for, on the one hand, metamorphosis, and on the other hand, inhabiting artefacts.

Photo 2. – Flute ornament (beg. 20th c., Wood, shell, seeds, human hair, fibres, pigments; 11 x 45 x 9,5 cm; musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac). Human figures (and those including human materials, such as hair, or sometimes bones) are not necessarily used to indicate a *human* presence, but possibly, to indicate ancestral capacities, such as agency and intentionality (Descola's "interiority", 2010), and known to be *human-like*. The importance given to the head of the human figure (an in particular to the gaze) not only refers to the role of headhunting, but also acts as a visual device both to indicate the ancestral nature of the flutes themselves, and their capacity to become the voice of the ancestors.

## Containers to make the Spirits visible and present

Invisible entities, be they spirits of the dead or other non-human entities which have never been human, are arguably the main *relata* or subjects of Sepik figuration. Both can be at the origin of cultural practices such as rituals, cultivation, carving (of canoes) or the erection of house, and are active players in the metaphysical march of the world. While not being necessary human (or alive, as in the case of spirits of the dead), these ancestral beings are seen as possessing capacities that are experienced by and recognised in humans, that is subjectivity, feeling and agency. These are parts of what Descola, in his discussion of images (2010), describes as "interiority", one of the analytical criteria to investigate his different "ontological regimes". While, my aim is not to define a specific "Sepik ontology", this concept of interiority seems adequate to investigate the different material manifestations of ancestral spirits. Indeed, ancestors' presence can be asserted through a variety of forms (Newton, 1971: 10): living beings (such as animals, insects, plants), landmarks (such as mountains, pools or cliffs), other phenomena such as sounds whose origin is unclear, weather (Stanek and Weiss, 2016: 74-75), earthquakes or landslides. In such a tightly knit cosmology, these forms can be either a manifestation of ancestral agency or an entity itself metamorphosed, troubling even more any possibility of direct identification.

From a visual perspective, the combination and merging of motifs testify to indigenous fluid ontological regimes dominated by such heterogeneity, transience and metamorphosis. In fact, images do not necessarily indicate the permanent presence of ancestors but their appearance, as bodies, indicate their capacity to act as containers. Indeed, in many cases, the presence of spirits could be transferred, as in the case of Abulës-speakers of Nyamikum village who use the term *de kwasawu* when referring to the activation of a carving (see Coupaye, 2017), or summoned into artefacts designed to this effect. Thus, through the active role of motifs, many figures could then act as temporary recipients of ancestral spirits or other forms of invisible powers. The success of such processes would depend on the appropriateness of the

designs (Forge, 1967; Kaufmann, 1979; Garnier, 2016) in combination with the crucial moment of naming, and other forms of ritual practices used to activate the artefacts or summon the ancestor inside it (e.g. Barlow and Lipset, 1997). Artefacts thus became possible temporary containers of agency whose origin could be secured via a set of techniques of "enchantment" (Gell, 1992).

Such techniques seemed to have been used in a wide range of productions. House posts bearing both human-like face or crocodile scales (Peltier *et al.*, 2016: cat. 46-47), or orator's pulpits showing a human figure with scarification marks (Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 50-51) could become instantiations of ancestors (Stanek and Weiss, 2016: 71). Such artefacts could then be imparted with forms of interiority (*wambung* for the Karawari, Telban, 2003, 2016: 57; *mawul* for the Manambu, Harrison, 1993: 97), granting them with agency. From a semiotic perspective, this agency could derive both from their visuality – the semiotic properties they mobilised, the instability of which also arose a revealing and concealing effect (Herle and Moutu, 2004) – and their materiality, that is, the actual process of rendering the ancestors present into an artefact. However, this "presencing", I suggest, comes from a special emphasis on the capacity of bodies to refer to outside/inside spatial relationships.

## Transforming the outside, creating an inside

The "body-as-container", or in the Sepik valley, the relation envelope/container (Stanek and Weiss, 2016: 75), can be mobilised in two ways, which are often combined. The first is the transformative role given to inside or enclosed spaces; the second is the ways in which surfaces can be modified to materialise a boundary. Many Sepik myths recount the metamorphosis of beings through the donning of the skin of pigs, cassowaries or other types of beings, thereby linking the transformation of appearance (of bodies, forms or envelope) to an actual metamorphosis of the figure. This relation helps to set contrasts between an outside, profane and visible, and an inside, secret and sacred, which then can contain creative capacities and/or be the recipient of powerful entities.

In the Maprik area, the ceremonial house synthesises several elements of these principles. The *kurabu*, with its painted façade, was seen as a cosmological space of transformation whose mythical origin was to be found in a cassowary (a female being) who danced to create all food. Depending on the stage of initiations organised by corresponding members of their opposite moiety, initiates had to crawl inside the building to see a variety of scenes, each one in a different chamber, the walls of which were lavishly painted like the façade showing powerful images of ancestral beings. These scenes, in particular for the higher stages, displayed imposing images of the Gwaldu, the highest manifestations of ancestral spirits, that were heavily decorated with large ornaments made of composite materials and accompanied by a range of painted sculptures (*wapinyan*) of humans, snakes and birds figures. The Puti figure itself was an image of an old container, now empty, because of what it had brought forth. During the final stage of the ritual, the body of initiates was transformed through a combination of paint and ornaments that was at times imposing, associating their appearance to carvings and decorated long yams and transforming them into avatars of ancestral spirits (Forge, 1967; Gerrits, 2012 [1978], Heermann, 1983; Smidt and McGuigan, 1993; Hauser-Schäublin, 2015 [1989]; Losche, 1995).

As a whole, the *kurabu* was a temporary receptacle of ancestral presence and could indeed, as D. Losche suggested (1995), be considered as a device combining female and male powers, and containing procreative powers aimed at transforming the initiates. The façade, visible from outside and afar, the walls of the inside chambers, the painted carvings and the decorated initiates together created a web of visual coherence through a tightly knit iconographic network which included yam mounds' abilities to bring forth new tubers (Coupaye, 2017). Such coherence was echoed in language, as attested by the various terms describing some elements of the setting: *wapinyan*, or carvings, were the "children of the long yam", and beyond the human figuration, the Abulës term *wut* for the inside walls of the *kurabu*, was also used for netbags, spider webs and wombs, thus asserting the crucial role of female reproductive capacities (Forge, 1967: 70; Hauser-Schäublin, 1996: 97-99).

This interplay between transformative cosmological spaces and modifications of envelops can be followed down to the Sepik valley. The transformation of forms through modifications of the appearance, either by acting on the "skin", or adding ornaments, was valid for buildings, artefacts and human bodies. Indeed, many elements of Sepik men's houses evoke principles similar to the Maprik *kurabu*; a range of images, such as masks or figures, enhanced the capacity of the men's houses to become a body, at times female itself (Kocher Schmid, 2016) which, in turn, could contain within itself spaces closer to the world of the ancestors (Schuster, 1985; Peltier, 2016). Female figures welcoming those who climb to the first level of the building or façade masks (Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 157, cat. 35; 169; cat. 49) not only adorn the men's house of ancestors' paraphernalia and make an explicit reference to female powers of procreation, but also mark the first level of the building as an appropriate receptacle for the sacred artefacts. Painted panels, or boards acting

as banisters, separated secluded space from the non-initiates (Peltier, 2016: 44-45) or covered the inside of the building (Kaufmann, 2016). The same capacity to host an ancestral spirit or to become the recipient of their powers seems to have been attributed to smaller containing forms such as drums (von Poser, 2016: 31) or canoes (Barlow and Lipset, 1997), even when displaying human and/or non-human traits, in particular, the crocodile for the Sepik river and the cassowary for the Maprik area (Newton, 1971; Hauser-Schäublin, 2015 [1989]; Telban, 2016).

The modalities of the transformation of envelopes can include the covering of human skin with designs, either painted or scarified (Herle and Moutu, 2004; Garnier, 2016: 79-80). The body can also be "augmented" with complex sets of ornaments, such as elements planted in the hair or carried on the body (or in the mouths such as the Abulës *karawut*, Hauser-Schäublin, 1996; also worn among the Manambu of Avatip, Harrison, 1993: 121). These complex combinations of elements taken from the environment (flowers, grass, pigments) or were human-made (such as the feather mosaic on the imposing *waken* of the Maprik area), transformed initiators or initiated into ancestors. Masks and their complex assemblages of ornaments were not only hiding the identity of the dancer, but also transformed its appearance, making it an ancestral image and an appropriate receptacle for the essence of spirits. The combination of the movements of the dancer, and the appendages, towering head ornaments, and the carved and painted faces added to costumes that echoed with other forms such as sculptures or even paintings, and even the fragrance of materials, all imparted the image with a life that brought the spirits of the dead, or of the ancestors, into the same space as the audience, which was the ceremonial ground. But these techniques also depended on the capacities of artists to draw, paint, carve or transform the external appearance, the surface, of objects and subjects.

## Creating surfaces: the transformative powers of artists

Metamorphosis and the capacity to transfer themselves into other forms are two of the main properties of ancestors which allow them to inhabit sacred objects. It is how, then, artefacts can acquire the capacity to make present ancestral powers of regeneration and reproduction of the world and its inhabitants.

However, while these powers are indeed crucial for the reproduction of the social order and of the cosmos (including non-human species and entities), it is human agents who actually manage to tap into such powers and to make them active. This relied on the skills of Great Men and ritual specialists, owners of ancestral rights on designs, names and lands, and who knew the appropriate and sanctioned forms these must take in discourses, ceremonial practices or artefacts. Due to the non-verbal nature of their productions, "artists" in particular possessed a deeply embodied knowledge, grounded in their aesthetic synthesis of fundamental concepts of their culture and of their environment, acquired through their training (Forge, 1967, 1970). As other ritual specialists (Barth, 1987), they were the repositories of the synthetic memory of the group's fundamental concepts. It was this aesthetic memory which guided the ways in which the "canon" (Kaufmann, 2005) or the prototype (Gell, 1998) was kept in their mind and that they were in charge of materialising in their creations, giving form to an abstract schema of transformations. It was through their ability to articulate between, on the one hand, processes of motif creation and organisation and, on the other hand, the embodied knowledge of their visual culture, that Sepik artists managed to capture ancestral powers.

Kaufmann's discussion of style and "canon" (Kaufmann, 1993: 189-195; 2005) and of Severi's analysis of the ways in which images act as cognitive devices (Kaufmann, 2007) through the ways in which organisations of motifs and designs prompt mental and mnemonic processes, are particularly useful here. I relate their discussions to the ways in which this relation envelope/interior could in fact be seen as one of the actual main cognitive devices at play in many Sepik artefacts. In particular, I suggest that it is the set of formal relations (in a mathematical way, Gell, 1998: 77, 155-220; Küchler, 2001; Were, 2010) between designs such as symmetry, duplication, rotation, translation, scaling and combination, which provided motifs with agency. Based on the suggestions made by Forge, Tuzin, Bateson, Kaufmann and Severi, it might be possible to infer the ways in which such relations are translated into visual dynamics of *surfaces* and three-dimensional spaces, or *volumes*.

Both surfaces and volumes are conceptually and visually related and codetermined. A volume is delimited by its surface; a surface creates a boundary between two spaces. Such codetermination, I suggest, plays an important role in the ways in which Sepik artefacts visually operate, and manifests itself in the ways in which surfaces are treated – particularly because of the ubiquitous position of "skin" and "appearance" as a major way to describe the body, which emphasises the role of surface.

In Sepik arts, surfaces receive different modes of treatments that are sometimes combined. Surfaces can be plane or curved (Bahinemo *garra* masks, Newton, 1971: 19, 28-29, fig. 34-43, MQB Inv.: 72.1966.3.60, photo 3), to the extent that pre-

Photo 3. – Anthropomorphic figure (face) (Wood, pigments; 41.5 x 96 x 11,5 cm; musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac). The treatment of the surface, combining polychromic bands, holes, projected elements on a concave background, impinges on the automatic identification of the figure as a human face. Though the sculptor has positioned holes one either side of the central axis, and at its bottom, creating enough features for the face to be recognised. As Severi discussed (2007), the challenges to our recognition function as an arresting device, bringing our attention to the elements combined (also photo 4).

sents a proper three-dimensional volume (Gell, 1998: 190-196).

Modifications range from painting (Kwoma panels, Kaufmann, 1979), incising (on carvings, or human skin), the piercing of holes (*malu* board, Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 146, cat. 27), or additions (noses, finials, hooks, etc.). Surfaces also have limits that produce contours and whole shapes – triangular, oval or rectangular, even when incomplete (Severi, 2007: 80-83). Shapes also emerge out of designs. As Hauser-Schäublin recalls (1996: 87, 2011; Forge, 1967), lines are one of the main characteristics of Abulës aesthetics. Used on paintings, they delineate areas to be filled up with other motifs or colours. Lines thus define surfaces with an inside, creating a space within the plane of the figure. This plane appears thus as an envelope, evoking an interior which can be filled up with colours and designs as sources of powers.

The combination of these treatments, shapes, and modifications allows for the figuration of forms, such as bodies, limbs, organs or faces, be it painted or incised on a surface or in the round. Examples abound of such modes of figuration, even when focussing on few facial features, such as mouths or, in particular, eyes. Along with variations of circles, ovals, crescents or even slits, techniques extend from the painting (the *meni* circle of Gwaldu figures of Maprik *kurabu* façade, Forge, 1973), the piercing of holes (Iatmul house masks, Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 159, cat. 36), and assemblages (Kambot feather boards, Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 208, cat. 94-95) to, more commonly, the creation of three-dimensional features. To achieve the latter, Sepik artists could again use different techniques such as the adjunction of materials like cowries or shells (Iatmul *awan* mask; Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 260, cat. 142), modelling (Kwoma pottery; Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 295-296, cat. 80-82), plaiting or twining (e.g. on basketry mask, Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 258; cat.140), or the carving out of the contours of eyelids (hook from Murik area, Peltier *et al.*, 2016: 193, cat. 76).

These different forms of treatment of surfaces and their combination, create a form of "cognitive saliency" (Gell, 1998: 71-95), attracting the attention on the existence and presence of an envelope. This idea of saliency, reminiscent of Bateson's analysis, has been pointed by Severi as being "based on the mobilisation of implicit aspects of images" (2007: 326-327, my translation). Saliency, which comes from a *challenge* to visual expectations is balanced with *order*, which allows recognition, to give images their efficacy. Both give them their capacity to bring to attention a particular relation between a visible aspect and an invisible one – in the case of Bahinemo's hook-mask (photo 4) it is the memorisation of names (Severi, 2007: 79-88; Newton, 1971: 19; 28-29, fig. 34-43).

In the context of my discussion of envelope/containers, Gell's and Severi's suggestions have two correlates. First, it is possible to consider the treatments of the surface as purposefully bringing the focus of the viewer's gaze to the surface and allows him/her to infer the existence of something either *behind or beyond it*. Second, the motifs on the surface also create their own space, acting as a boundary between an interior and an exterior. This additional space may appear flat but spatial relationships created by the repetitiveness, symmetry and formal relations (Gell, 1998: 77; Bateson, 1971) give the surface its own saliency by appearing as intercalated between inside and outside. The covering with motifs contributes to the transformation of the space the surface encloses, such as painted panels on the inside of a Kwoma men's house, or on the Abulës-speakers' *kurabu* façade and walls.

Both Kaufmann's (1979, 2005, 2016; also Bowden, 1983 and Rovère and Mélandri, 2008) and Forge's (1973; also Hauser-Schäublin, 1989) analyses show the declension of canonic motifs into singular productions[6] on not only the same

artefact, but also across several types of production (carvings, cassowary bone ornaments, drums, etc.) are what make "relationships" the core subject of representation (Forge, 1973: 89; Gell, 1998). Such declension acts at two levels. The first level uses relations of symmetry, duplications, rotations or translation, or scaling as systems of visual transformations while keeping enough similarities for the recognition of similarities (Were, 2010). At a higher level, the whole organisation of patterns can also present variations in proportions, or composition, but always within the limits of specific rules that allows for its recognition as being part of an embodied corpus (e.g. the ways *kurabu* motifs are organised in registers – *gaay*, "layers", "place"; the combination of heterogeneous motifs to compose an anthropomorphic figure).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I examined a range of Sepik valley human figures, building on the non-verbal dimensions of images identified by Forge, Tuzin and Bateson, and expanded on by researchers such as Kaufmann, Gell and Severi. I hypothesised that one of the non-verbal devices relies on an underlying conception of images-as-potential-receptacles. As a result, we could suggest that the visual systems used by Sepik artists in their representation of anthropomorphic figures, resort to motifs (as material and spatial arrangements) which trigger inferential processes (indexical, iconical, or mnemonic) that *indicate* a reference to bodies-as-containers. Based on recent exploration of the crucial role of transformation of the appearances of artefacts in the manipulation of ancestral agency, my suggestion focused on the ways in which their surfaces are treated in order to both reveal and conceal an interior, as a possible container of ancestral capacities.

I wish to end this paper with a final note on one of the contributions about which Sepik imagery invites us to consider. It seems to me that Sepik images and their modalities of display could also provide some insights into local tactics of dealing with the dynamics of social life, by the ways in which images offer snapshots of ongoing processes, a moment during which relations are framed to be "given to see" (Houseman and Severi, 1995). They simultaneously are particular instantiations of canons or prototypes that exist as sets of relations in indigenous representations, as well as giving shape and offering to the experience synthetic, complex and/or unthinkable ideas which, while escaping the scope of verbal explanation, still resonate with the foundations of social lives.

Photo 4. – Mask, Bahinemo (20th c.; Wood, pigments; 29,3 x 20,5 x 7 cm. Paris, musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac). These type of masks has been thoroughly analysed by C. Severi (2007: 79-88). The visual aspects of the human-like face challenge expectations, forcing the viewer to extrapolate the rest of the features. According to Severi, more than iconic or indexical relations, the image triggers mnemonic processes in the viewer, binding the features with cultural contents such as names.

As a result, if anything, Sepik images, in their diversity, seem to display their own version of our own metaphysical concerns about the relations between entities and processes. While images might not give us, anthropologists, a final answer about their ontological groundings, they could well indicate an analogous concern about the tension between forms and fluxes.

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6. E.g. The pointed oval identified as female genitalia, *kitnya* – in itself a motif inherently referring to spatial nature of the human [female] body and its capacities (Hauser-Schäublin, 1989).

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